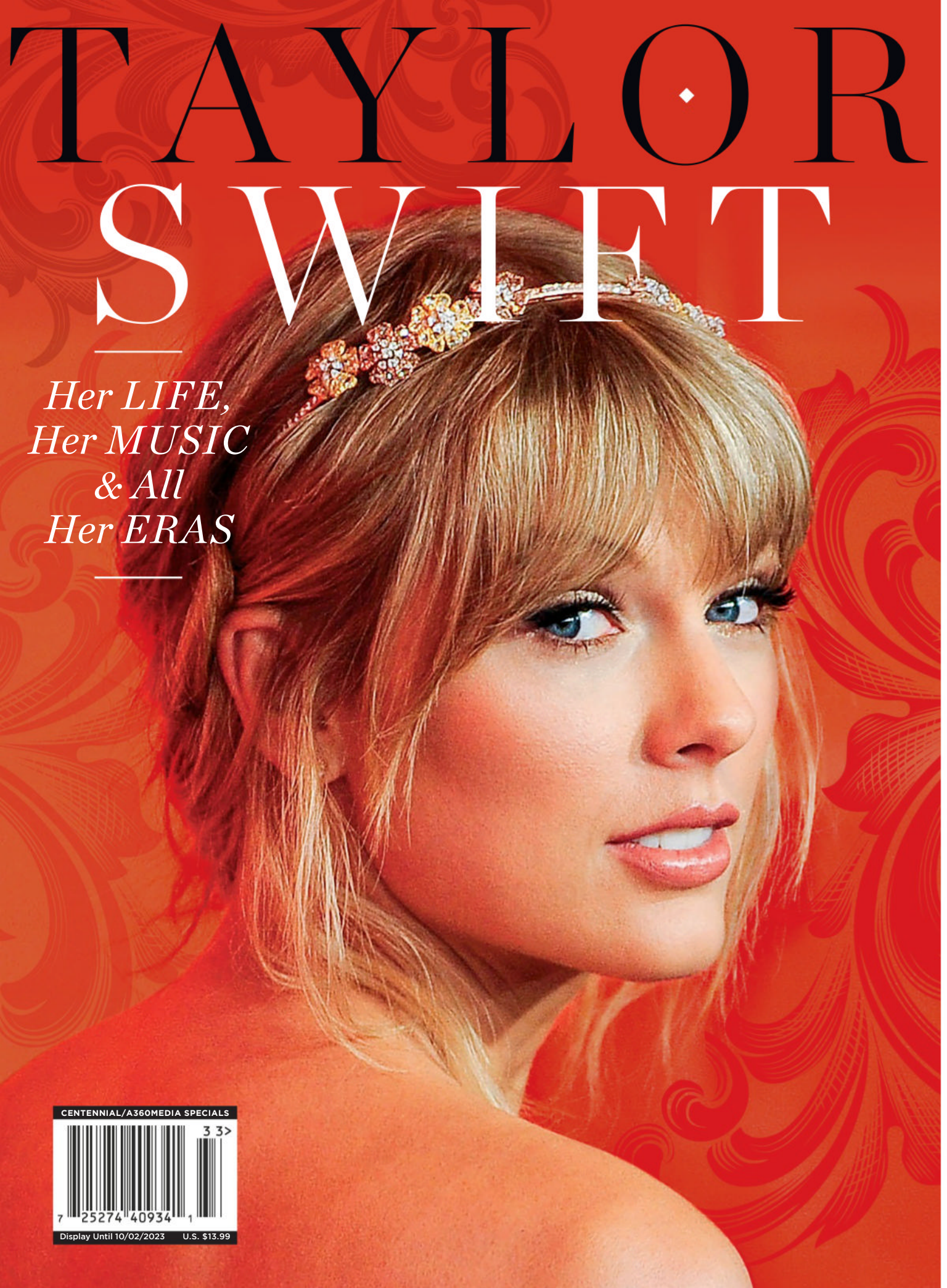
TAYLOR SWIFT

Her LIFE, Her MUSIC & All Her ERAS



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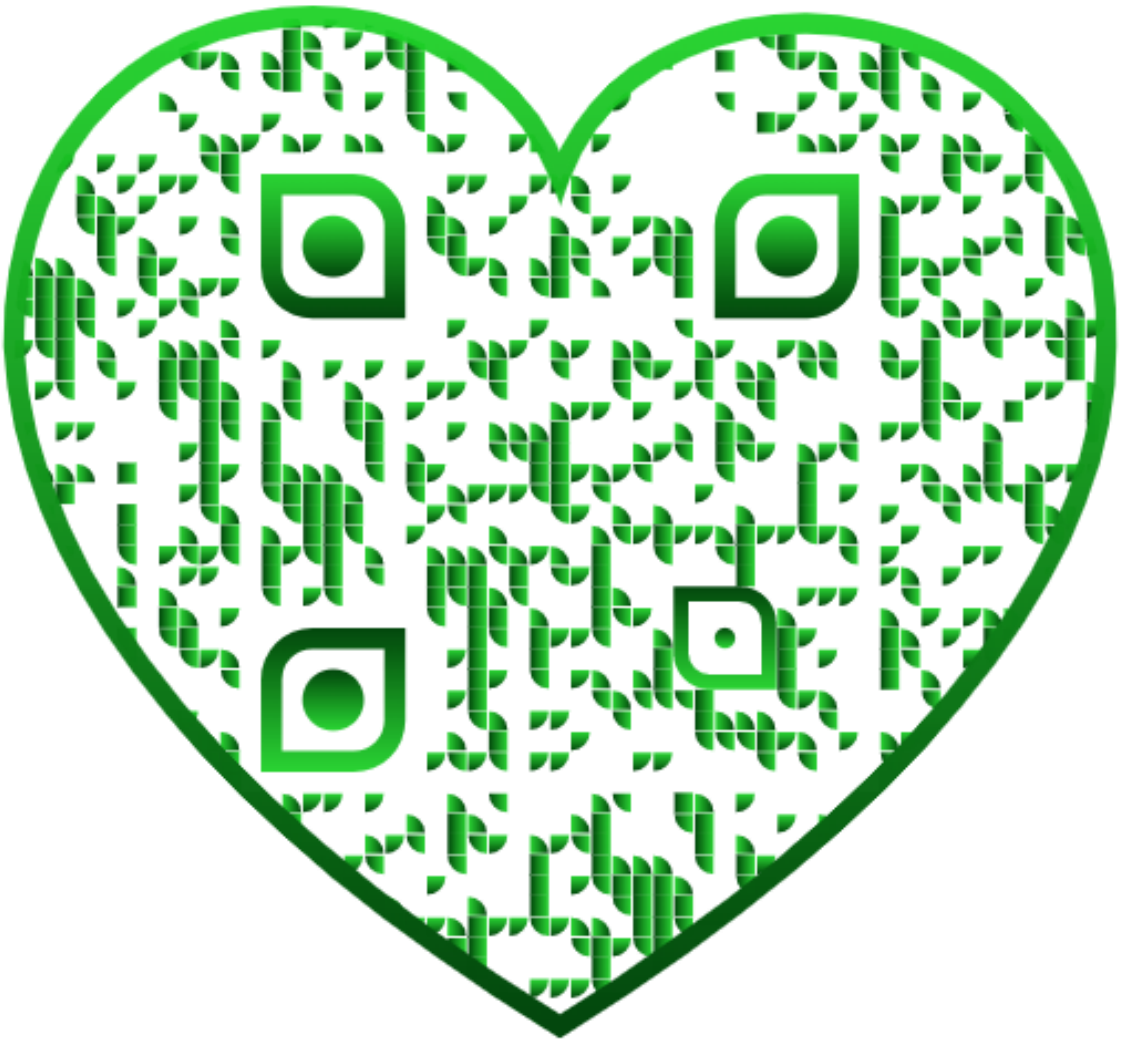

TAYLOR
SWIFT

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SINGING HER STORY
Swift at L.A.'s Staples Center on Aug. 21, 2015, during a 1989 World Tour Live show.

A Life in Song

The best way to know Taylor Swift is to listen

News of Taylor Swift's Eras Tour was met with so much excitement, emotion and ticket demand in November 2022 that the concerts could become one of the biggest runs of live shows in the history of pop music. It would be a remarkable accomplishment, but not all that shocking considering the multitude of record-breaking achievements Swift has managed to amass since she first arrived on the music scene in 2006. On her way to becoming the definitive musical icon of her generation—over the course of 10 albums in 16 years—Swift has created an impressive catalog of work that would be Hall of Fame–worthy even if she called it a career tomorrow.

Swift has rarely stayed in one lane as an artist—bounding between genres and masterfully combining styles all centered around her deeply personal songwriting. She began as a pure country wunderkind, filtering clear-eyed high school romanticism through classic Nashville tropes on her self-titled debut album. Almost immediately afterwards, she bucked the country establishment and has rarely stayed in one place since, dabbling in cinematic pop-country, big-tent pop, throwback electro rock, folk-adjacent indie and straight up, banging R&B. Throughout her many shifts, she has regularly topped charts, broken sales records, smashed glass ceilings and inspired a near-maniacal devotion in her fanbase.

But despite all the attention, Swift remains something of an unknowable enigma. Even though she has lived so much of her young life in the public eye, the best way to know Taylor Swift is through her music—an incredible body of work that reveals a nuanced life story more clearly than any sit-down interview could possibly detail. These are her songs. These are her stories. These are her eras.

CHAPTER 1

Taylor Swift

2006

Taylor started her career in country—because she liked it

COUNTRY GIRL
Taylor spent her early years on a Christmas tree farm with her mom, Andrea, and her dad, Scott (left, top), and grew into a fresh-faced blond (bottom).

SHOW STRUMMER
Swift (right) performs at the Academy of Country Music New Artists' Show Party for a Cause, at the MGM Grand Ballroom in Las Vegas on May 14, 2007.

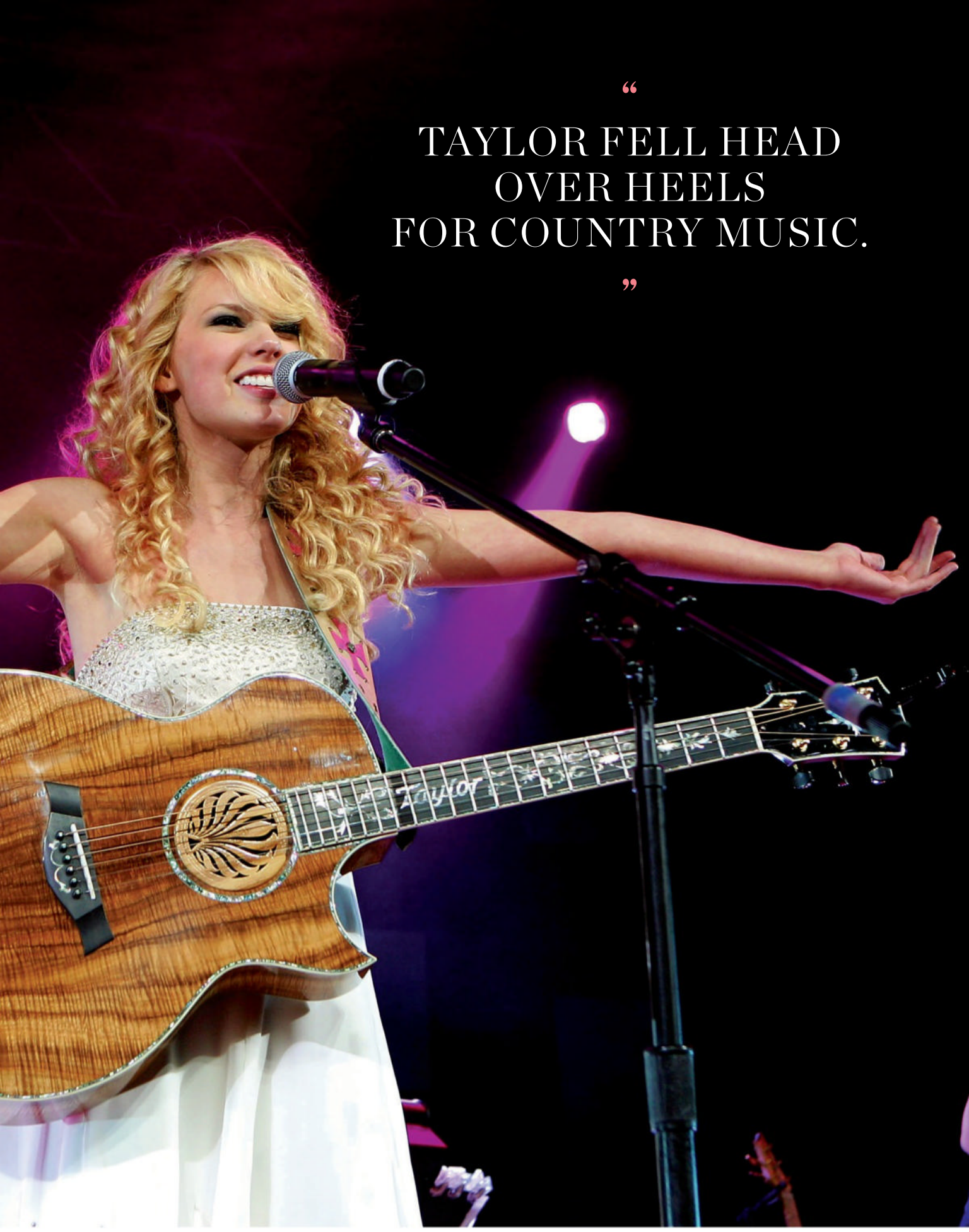
Though she didn't know it yet, Taylor

Swift's birthday would become a huge part of her iconography as an artist. She was born Dec. 13, 1989, and both the day she arrived (she declared 13 her lucky number and her Twitter handle is @TaylorSwift13) and the year of her birth (she would later title her fifth album *1989*) have played into the greater tapestry of her musical life. Swift grew up comfortable (both her parents came from the world of finance) on a Christmas tree farm in southeastern Pennsylvania, and fell in love with performing at an early age. She started acting in local musicals, taking voice lessons, competing in karaoke competitions and receiving wisdom from her grandmother, a former opera singer (who was the subject of the song "Marjorie," which Swift would later record for *Evermore*).

When she was 10, Taylor fell head over heels for country music, particularly the pop crossover work of Shania Twain and Faith Hill that made it into the mainstream. She was particularly enamored of the way those songs told stories, and she committed herself to learning songcraft, partially as a way of pursuing her dream and partially as a respite from what was becoming an increasingly alienating experience

Taylor

WITH FEELING
On May 15, 2007, Swift performed at the Academy of Country Music Awards All-Star Jam at the MGM Grand Conference Center in Las Vegas.



“TAYLOR FELL HEAD OVER HEELS FOR COUNTRY MUSIC.”

THREE PIECE
Swift showed off her moves onstage alongside Brad Paisley (left, center) and Kellie Pickler (near left) at the CMA Awards in Nashville on Nov. 7, 2007.

TROPHY TRIUMPH
On April 16, 2007, Swift's song "Tim McGraw" won Breakthrough Video of the Year at the Country Music Television Awards in Nashville (below).

in middle school. "I was going through a really tough time in school and facing a lot of rejection among my peers," she explained. "I found that I was alone a lot of the time, kind of on the outside looking into their discussions and the things they were saying to each other. They really didn't talk to me. In the process of coming to that realization, I started developing this really keen sense of observation—of how to watch people and see what they did. From that sense, I was able to write songs about relationships."

By the time Taylor hit her teen years, she was being courted by record labels and inspired her family to move to Nashville, where she became the youngest songwriter ever drafted into a publishing contract at Sony Music's Nashville arm. Her label paired her with another up-and-coming songwriter, a Texan named Liz Rose, with whom Swift bonded almost immediately. That relationship yielded the bulk of what ended up being Swift's self-titled debut album—Rose cowrote most everything on the record.

At the same time, Swift met Scott Borchetta, a record executive who was then in the process of setting up his own label, Big Machine Records. Borchetta saw Swift perform at an industry event and signed her as his first act. She took the songs she had been working on with Rose (along with a handful of other

SONG SUMMIT
Swift met Tim McGraw—the namesake of one of her first songs—for the first time at the Academy of Country Music Awards in Las Vegas on May 15, 2007 (below).

AWARD SESSION
On Dec. 6, 2007, Swift (right) attended the announcement of the nominations for the Grammy Awards. She received a nod for Best New Artist.

Music Row collaborators) and turned it into her 2006 debut, *Taylor Swift*, which arrived a couple of months before her 17th birthday. The summer before the album dropped, Swift had sent a single to radio stations called "Tim McGraw," a song she'd written during a freshman-year math class about all the things she'd miss about her college-bound boyfriend—including her favorite country artist. The song steadily rose up the country charts, and thanks to the critical love for her debut and the name-recognition of its subject, "Tim McGraw" made the jump to the Billboard Hot 100, peaking at No. 40 (a relatively rare accomplishment for a country artist, particularly with her debut).

Taylor Swift is a pure country album that epitomizes mid-aughts Nashville music. Though Swift has writing credits on all 11 tracks, the record doesn't indulge in the same kind of brutal honesty that her later albums would. (Instead, it has references to such country tropes as pickup trucks and beer, which feel like they came from outside influences.) But her personality is undeniable, and though "Teardrops On My Guitar" and "Should've Said No" are fleshed out with banjos, fiddles and steel guitars, the melodies are pop-friendly and her teenage romanticism is pure and authentic. Swift could have enjoyed a fine career in Nashville, but she had other, significantly bigger plans.

“*TAYLOR SWIFT* IS A PURE COUNTRY ALBUM.”

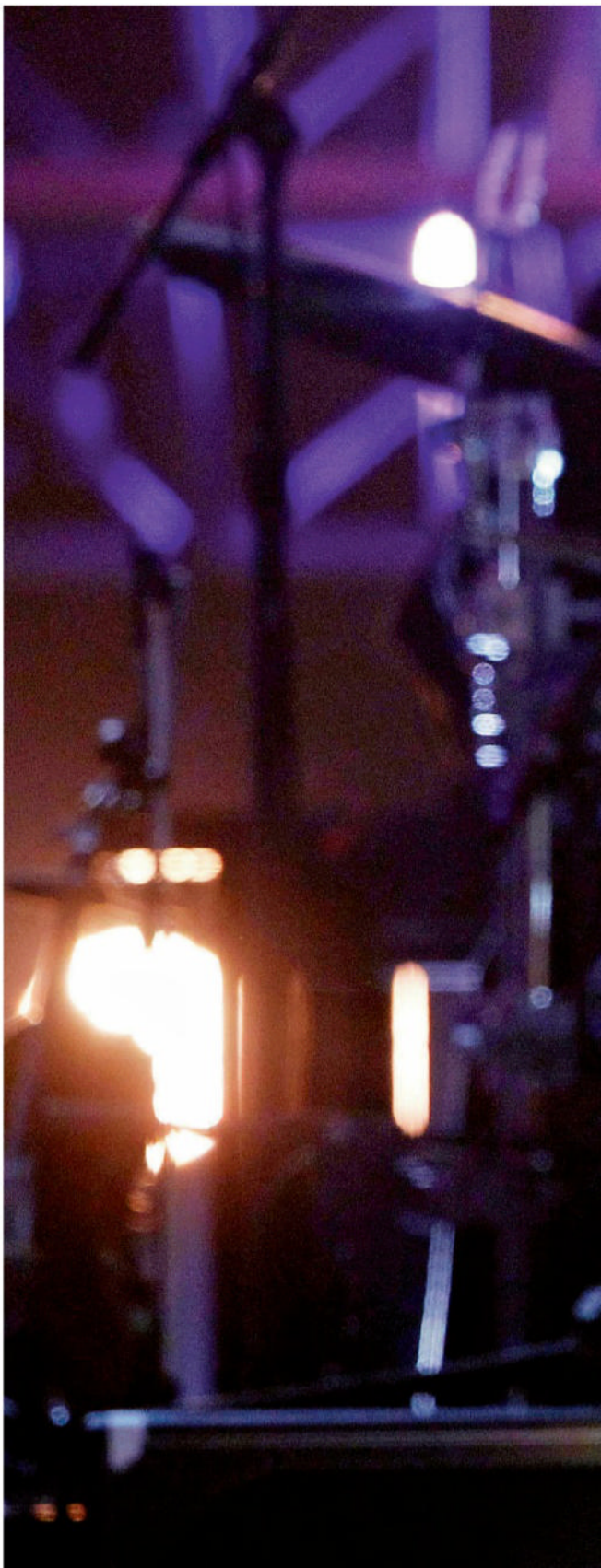
CHAPTER 2

Fearless 2008

Swift went from prodigy to phenomenon

CHAPTER 2

Taylor Swift's first proper



year as a star followed a traditional arc: Her self-titled debut sold steadily as she released more singles and spent time on the road as the opening act for such industry stalwarts as George Strait and Brad Paisley. Mainstream media outlets and pop radio kept noticing her—and while there had been plenty of other young female artists in country music's vast history—most notably LeAnn Rimes, who scored a massive hit with "How Do I Live" when she was just 14—these performers had never really catered to the demographic of which they were a part: teenagers who were engaged with the Nashville sound. That audience had never experienced a country star speaking directly to them. Swift was, and that pushed her into a much bigger spotlight.

All the while, she continued to write songs while gently taking more control over the direction of her career. More than half the tunes that made it on her sophomore release, *Fearless*, which arrived in the fall of 2008, were written solely by Swift. But she also continued her working relationship with Liz Rose,

PURPLE DAYS
On May 8, 2010, a more refined Swift strutted her stuff in front of a sold-out arena in Moline, Illinois, during a stop on her Fearless tour (below).

STAGE ACCLAIM
Fearless brought Swift notice from a wide range of sources, including the 2008 American Music Awards (left, top) and the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards (bottom).

ROYAL RECORD
Swift (right) plays the part of a princess during a performance of her hit song "Love Story" at the CMA Awards in Nashville on Nov. 12, 2008.

"*FEARLESS* IS A DRAMATIC LEAP FORWARD FROM SWIFT'S DEBUT."

while collaborating with Nashville veteran John Rich (the former Lonestar bass guitarist, who later teamed up with Big Kenny as Big & Rich) and ascendent singer-songwriter Colbie Caillat (one of the many buzzy musicians in the mid-2000s who first broke on MySpace). From every perspective, *Fearless* is a dramatic leap forward from Swift's debut: The songs are more refined, the lyrics more deeply personal, and the production more cinematic and pop-leaning. Top 40 radio had no trouble embracing "Tim McGraw" or "Teardrops On My Guitar," but songs like "Love Story" and "You Belong With Me" are built around arena rock dynamics and hooks and feel custom made for the upper echelons of the Billboard Hot 100 (both went top five).

Fearless also allowed Swift to start to codify her visual language. Though she retained her signature blond curls, the cover of her second album is significantly more glamorous-looking than was the cover of her debut. The videos crafted for the singles—particularly the lush costume drama clip for "Love Story," directed by frequent Swift collaborator Trey Fanjoy—cast her as a literal romantic princess who was also a perpetually heartbroken underdog.

POP WALK
Swift (above) walks the stage while she sings on July 16, 2008, during an outdoor concert on Shadow Hill Ranch in Twin Lakes, Wisconsin.

HAIR GUITAR
On Aug. 27, 2009, Swift (left)—with her golden locks flying—rocked out with her six string during a show at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

Though she was fast becoming a high-powered star, there's little of her new lifestyle on *Fearless*, save for some internal fretting about her career on "Change." And even amidst all the swooning and boys and heartbreak, there's also some classic country storytelling, most notably on "The Best Day," a clear-eyed tale about when her mom took her shopping to cheer her up after a bad day at school. It's a sweet reminder that even though Swift was remarkably young, she was still able to tap into acute details often missed by even the most experienced songwriters.

Taylor Swift was a solid crossover hit, but *Fearless* was a genuine sensation that announced the arrival of a dominant new star. It sold over 7 million copies in the United States alone, and it was accompanied by her first world tour, an elaborate theatrical presentation that ended up drawing more than a million people and grossing an estimated $66 million. Swift collected almost every award there was to win, including Album of the Year honors from both the

HOLIDAY REVUE
On Dec. 31, 2008, Swift performed an outdoor set during *Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve* in New York City's Times Square (below).

STANDING ALONE
Swift grips the microphone and looks over the crowd during the Country Thunder USA music festival in Twin Lakes, Wisconsin, on July 16, 2009 (right).

Country Music Association and the Academy of Country Music. She picked up her first MTV Video Music Award for Best Female Video for "You Belong With Me" in 2009, which was the ceremony that saw her acceptance speech interrupted by Kanye West, an incident that would color both of their careers for years. And on Grammy night 2010, *Fearless* not only won the prize for Best Country Album but also the statuette for Album of the Year, making Swift the youngest artist ever to win that award at the time. It seemed like Swift was everywhere doing everything and always winning—and she was just warming up.

"*FEARLESS* WAS A GENUINE SENSATION."

CHAPTER 3

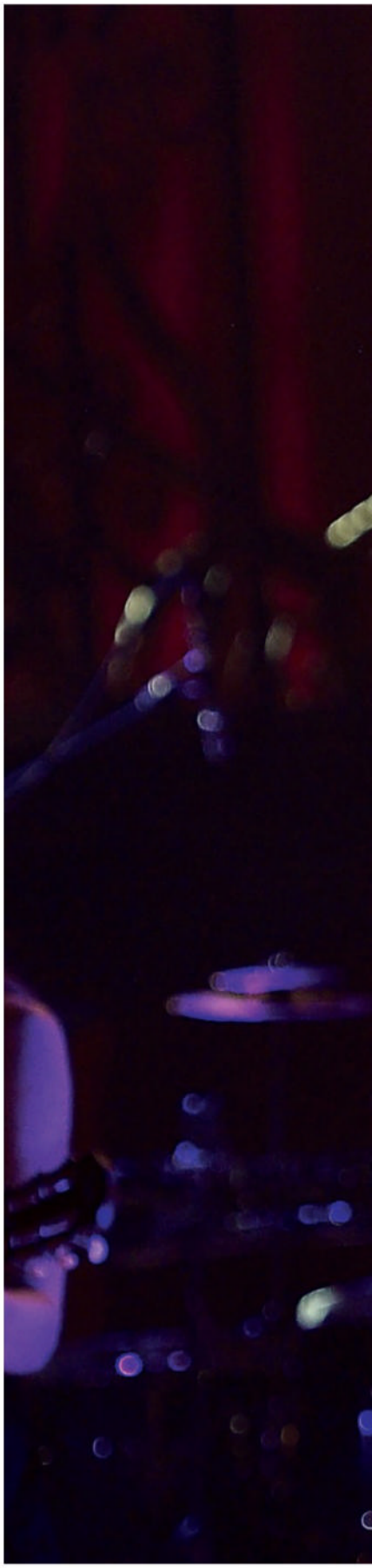
Speak Now 2010

Fame, exes and confidence

By 2010, the idea of Taylor Swift

setting sales records or collecting awards was no longer unthinkable—and she was still barely old enough to buy a celebratory glass of champagne. Her albums and live appearances were huge events, and she had already begun dipping her toe into acting, taking a role in Garry Marshall's holiday anthology film, *Valentine's Day*, and making her debut as a host on *Saturday Night Live*. Her celebrity had also increased exponentially, particularly following a number of high-profile romances (including with Joe Jonas, Taylor Lautner and John Mayer) and the incident at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards when Kanye West trampled on her acceptance speech for Best Female Video. Swift was not just a breakout music star anymore, she was click-producing tabloid fodder—and a target for unwanted attention. "I fought the idea of having security for a very long time, because I really value normalcy," she said later. "The sheer number of men we have in a file who have showed up at my house, showed up at my mom's house, threatened to either kill me, kidnap me, or marry me. This is the strange and sad part of my life that I try not to think about."

Even in the midst of the swirl of publicity surrounding her, Swift continued to circle back to songwriting. From a musical perspective, 2010's *Speak Now* is the only entry in her early catalog that sounds like the album that came before it. There's a clear continuation of the sound she had set up on *Fearless*, with even fewer country elements present in the mix. But whatever *Speak Now* lacks in innovation it more than makes up for in songwriting specificity,



PLAYING DRESS-UP
On May 21, 2011, Swift opened the last dress rehearsal for her upcoming tour to fans in Nashville to benefit the victims of recent deadly tornadoes in the southeast.

RAISING THE BAR
After the release of her blockbuster third album, Swift (left) played more than 100 shows on four continents during her Speak Now World Tour from 2011 to 2012.

BIG FINISH
At her final show of 2011, on Nov. 22 at Madison Square Garden in New York City, Swift shared the stage with singer and friend Selena Gomez (below, right).

> “*SPEAK NOW* WAS A CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL JUGGERNAUT.”

with Swift mining the depths of her personal life in order to craft revealing lyrics.

For the first and only time in her career, she was the sole credited writer on every song on one of her albums, and most every one finds Swift dealing with her feelings and her celebrity. There are a handful of songs specifically aimed at exes (“Dear John” is about Mayer, while “Back to December” was inspired by Lautner), but she also dreams about unrequited crushes (“Mine”) and getting back a lost love (“Speak Now”). The album also found Swift sharpening her edges in a way she had not done before: “Innocent” scolds Kanye West, “Better Than Revenge” finds her actively doling out retribution (rather than just wishing for it), and “Mean” claps back at music critic Bob Lefsetz, who

GLITTER ROCK
On Nov. 21, 2011—the date of Swift's second-to-last concert of the year—the Speak Now World Tour lit up New York City's Madison Square Garden.

wrote a negative review of Swift's performance alongside Stevie Nicks at the 2010 Grammy Awards.

Despite all the new negative vibes orbiting Swift, *Speak Now* was a cultural and commercial juggernaut: The album sold over a million copies in its first week of release (despite a year of steady decline for all other music sales), and it spent six weeks on top of the Billboard album chart. The record was the third highest-selling full-length release of 2010 even though it dropped only two months before the year was complete. In February 2011, Swift hit the road for the Speak Now World Tour, performing more than 100 shows on four continents. She flexed her reach as an ascendent pop goddess during that trek, often inviting special guests from across the spectrum of the music world to join her onstage, including Nicki Minaj, Justin Bieber, Darius Rucker, Selena Gomez and Usher. Even though the Grammys still confined Swift to the country categories and "Mean" was built around a banjo, she clearly had other ideas. By sharing the stage with huge stars from different genres, she was laying the groundwork for her exponential evolution—in the next era of her career, she would team with fresh collaborators nobody expected.

GOLDEN MOMENT
Swift holds up two of the trophies she won at the 2012 Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, for Best Country Song and Best Country Solo Performance (above).

KILLER SMILE
The singer (right, with her banjo) performs her song "Mean" onstage at the 54th Annual Grammy Awards at Staples Center in Los Angeles on Feb. 12, 2012.

I'll be big enough so you can't hit me.

CHAPTER 4

Red

2012

Swift's fourth studio album marked her full-blown arrival as a pop trendsetter

SEEING RED
Swift (left), in a shimmering top and red shorts, performs onstage at Madison Square Garden in New York City during the Z100 Jingle Ball on Dec. 7, 2012.

FRINGE BENEFITS
The success of *Red* gave Swift many things, including multi-platinum status (right, top) and a duet with Ed Sheeran in London on Feb. 1, 2014 (bottom).

When Taylor Swift released

"We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" as the first single from *Red* in August of 2012, there was a lot of speculation about to which ex-boyfriend she was delivering that message. (The assumption has always been that it was about actor Jake Gyllenhaal; he and Swift dated for a few months at the end of 2010.) But it might just as well have been a kiss-off to the Nashville establishment. *Red* is the sound of Swift leaving her country roots in the dust and fully embracing the wide world of synthesized pop. "I was standing on a state line," Swift said of her existence in both the pop and country worlds. "I had a foot on either side of the borderline."

To pull off this very public transformation, she brought in a multitude of ringers. After writing the entirety of *Speak Now* on her own, Swift worked with some of the most renowned songsmiths on the pop landscape: Max Martin (the Swedish musical architect who was responsible for almost every huge hit of the late '90s pop wave, including Britney Spears' "...Baby One More Time" and NSYNC's "It's Gonna

LADY IN RED
On May 25, 2013, Swift played for a sold-out crowd of more than 53,000 at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas, during the Red Tour.

> “*RED* WAS SORT OF LIKE MY COLLEGE YEARS.”

Be Me,” and who had found more recent success with Katy Perry and Maroon 5), Shellback (Martin’s slightly edgier protégé, who created his own hits with Avril Lavigne and Usher), Dan Wilson (the former frontman for Semisonic—they did “Closing Time” in ’98—who had done award-winning co-writes with the Chicks and Adele), and Jacknife Lee (the Irish producer who had become a go-to teammate of U2 and R.E.M.).

Red was not a complete upheaval (longtime songwriting partner Liz Rose is on there, as is stalwart producer Nathan Chapman), but it was a massive leap forward, and the sometimes schizophrenic nature of the album was a purposeful choice. “It was sort of a metaphor for how messy a real breakup is, and this is my only true breakup album,” Swift said. “I love Jackson Pollock, and I see this album as my splatter-paint album, using all the colors and throwing it at the wall and seeing what sticks.”

The centerpiece of *Red* is the first single. “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together” opens as many Swift songs do, with a simple acoustic guitar and her

BIG NIGHT
Swift won eight categories—including Top Artist—at the Billboard Music Awards at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas on May 19, 2013 (left).

DANCE PARTY
Along with a troupe of backup dancers, Swift performed her upbeat single "22" onstage at the 2013 Billboard Music Awards in Las Vegas (below).

> "THIS IS MY ONLY TRUE BREAKUP ALBUM."

plaintive vocals. But once the chorus kicks in, the whole track gives way to a gigantic, insistent drumbeat that is designed to sound huge in stadiums and inspire stomping singalongs. It was co-writers Martin and Shellback who suggested Swift draw out the first word of the chorus (We-eeeee) to give it a little extra spice, and their influence is key to the other standouts on *Red*, including the dubstep-incorporating "I Knew You Were Trouble" and the bubbly keyboard explosion "22." Those are the songs that *Red* is best remembered for, but there's also the Rose-assisted country pop amble "All Too Well," the

alt-rock power ballad "The Last Time" (featuring Snow Patrol frontman Gary Lightbody), and minimalist album closer "Begin Again."

Swift's calculations paid off like a slot machine. "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together" found her topping the Billboard Hot 100 for the first time, and *Red* dominated the holiday season to become the second-best selling album of 2012 (just behind Adele's *21*). *Red* ended up on a multitude of critics' year-end lists and gave Swift another Album of the Year nomination at the Grammys. It was a masterful and wildly successful career shift, but Swift mostly appreciates it for the learning experience. "[*Red*] was sort of like my college years of going out and trying stuff," she told *Rolling Stone* in 2020. "This was me being, 'What do I want from a songwriting session?' And picking up little bits as you go. It was really sort of the beginning of everything that I'm doing now."

RINGMASTER
Swift (above) wrapped up the European leg of her Red Tour with a sold-out show for more than 15,500 fans at London's O2 Arena on Feb. 11, 2014.

FEELING 22
On March 13, 2013, Swift (right) played for more than 13,800 fans when the Red Tour stopped at the CenturyLink Center in Omaha, Nebraska.

CHAPTER 5

1989

2014

With her most pop-heavy album yet, Swift's star shone bright

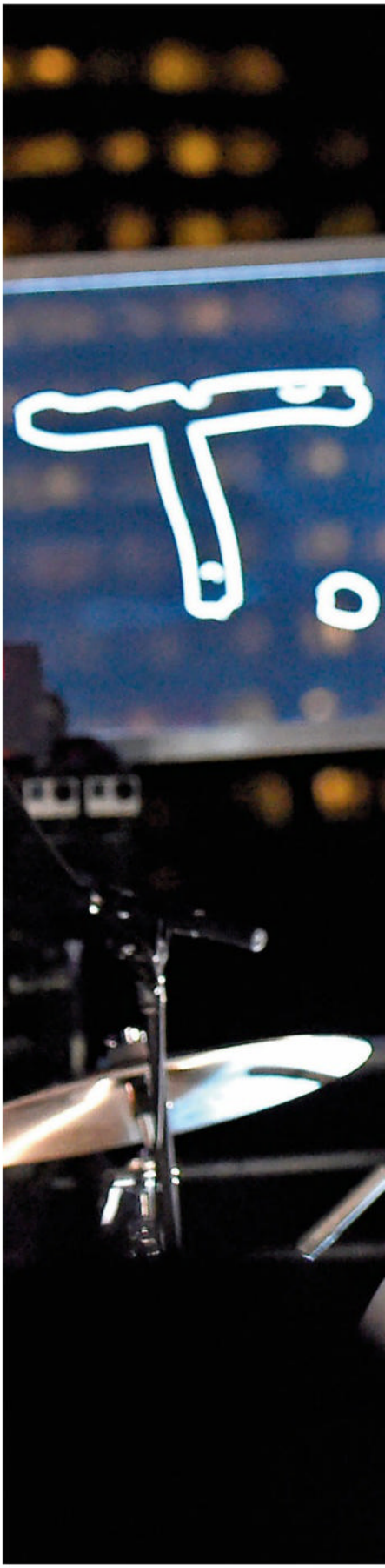
CHAPTER 5

On "We Are Never Ever Getting

Back Together," Taylor Swift's chart-topping single from her 2012 album, *Red*, she makes a reference to the fact that the ex-boyfriend she's singing to has chosen to listen to "some indie record that's much cooler than mine." But the truth was that *Red* scored Swift heaps of critical accolades. For her follow-up record two years later, though, no one could claim to have an album cooler than hers.

Released in October 2014, *1989* has several of the pop-forward hallmarks of its predecessor: Max Martin and Shellback returned for a handful of tracks (including lead single "Shake It Off") and the underlying sound of the album is even more consistently rooted in synth-pop and electronic sounds than *Red*. Pop maximalist Ryan Tedder (of OneRepublic and Beyoncé's "Halo" fame) and electropop pioneer Imogen Heap also show up on the record. But *1989* is most notable for marking the beginning of one of Swift's most successful collaborations: It was the first time she worked with Jack Antonoff.

Antonoff had been in a mid-tier alt-rock outfit called Steel Train before he formed the band fun. with Nate Ruess and Andrew Dost in 2008. The group's 2012 album, *Some Nights*, was a crossover juggernaut that spawned three top 20 hits, including the No. 1 track "We Are Young." Swift and Antonoff first crossed paths at the MTV Europe Music Awards in 2012. They were then put together to come up with an original song for the soundtrack to the movie *One Chance*, which told the story of *Britain's Got Talent* winner Paul Potts, and for which Swift's label, Big Machine, held the soundtrack rights. That



ROOF RAISER
On top of a New York City building with a few hundred fans on Oct. 27, 2014, Swift performed a Secret Session for iHeartRadio to promote the release of *1989*.

S. 1989

DYNAMIC DUO
Swift performing with frequent collaborator Jack Antonoff (far left) during the Grammy Awards at Staples Center in Los Angeles on Feb. 15, 2016.

CITY GAL
In New York City's Times Square on Oct. 30, 2014, Swift took to the stage on *Good Morning America* to promote the release of her fifth album, *1989* (below).

collaboration yielded "Sweeter Than Fiction," which was nominated for a Golden Globe. Swift enjoyed working with Antonoff and liked the '80s-infused synth-pop sound they landed on, so she brought him back for a pair of tracks on *1989*: The propulsive and dreamy "Out of the Woods" and the jangly anthem "I Wish You Would."

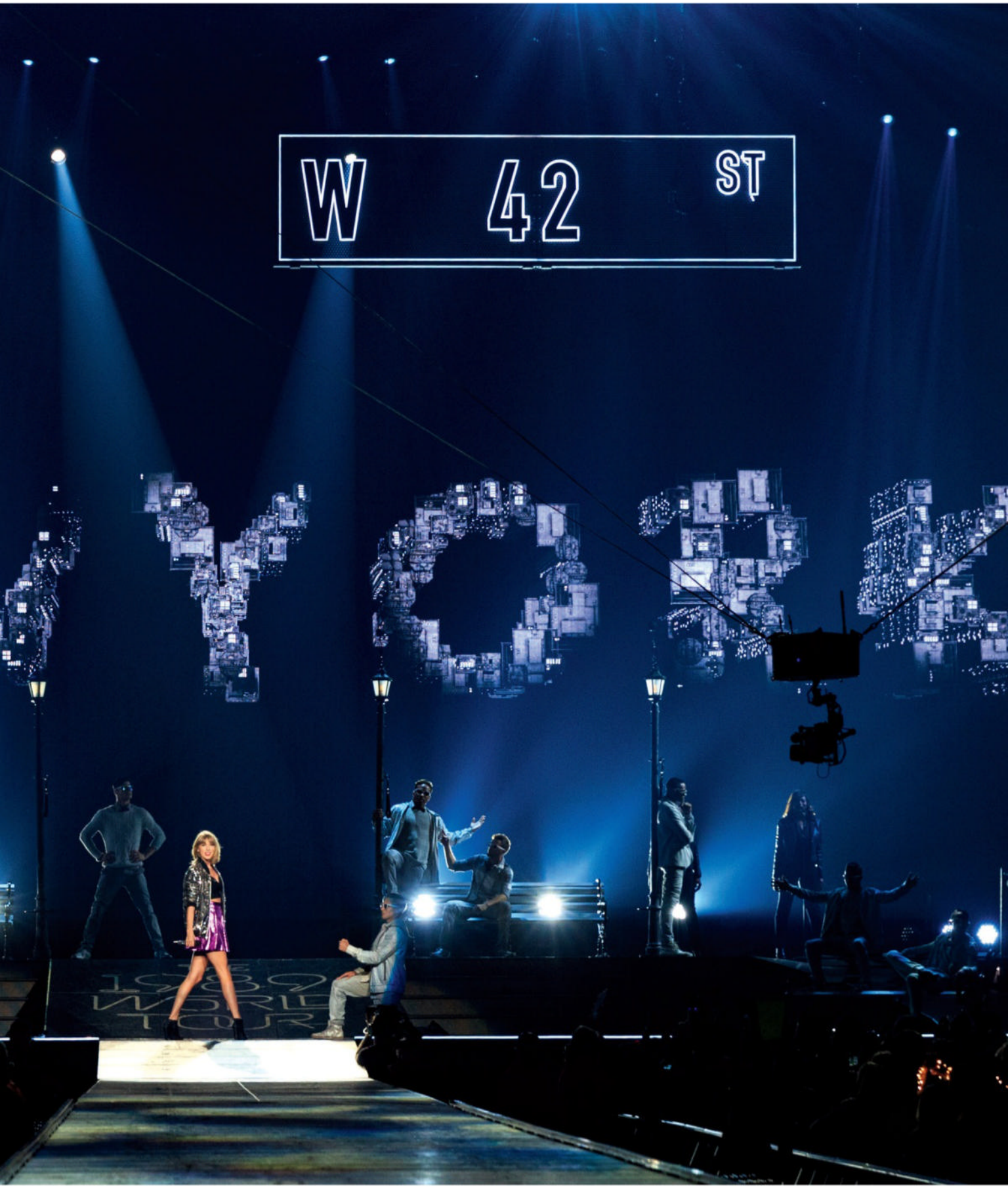
Antonoff would become one of Swift's key collaborators and thus help to shape pop music for years to come. "I've always been extremely drawn to female artists who are being brutally honest," he said. "That is so much more attractive to me than a lot of the weird paths certain male songwriters lead you down, that hide and mask emotions."

Many of the album's songs were inspired by Swift's move to New York City—she'd bought a pair of Tribeca townhouses and did her best to bring her newfound home into her music. Thus the opening track on *1989* is a jubilant tune called "Welcome to New York."

"New York has been an important landscape and location for the story of my life in the last couple of years," Swift said. "The inspiration that I found in that city is kind of hard to describe and hard to compare to any force of inspiration I've ever experienced in my life."

If *Red* was Swift's equivalent of going off to college, then *1989* is the sound of her postgrad year, with lots of ebullient jams about finding her way on her own and learning how to deal with the real world. It's the sound of Swift figuring it all out—as in finding a way to be comfortable in her own skin. Lead single "Shake It Off" is Swift in pure fun mode, dancing away the stress of the world like countless other people her age. But there's also a sense of melancholy running

GOTHAM ROAD SHOW
The stage was done up like the streets of New York, but the setting was Staples Center in L.A. when Swift played there on her 1989 World Tour on Aug. 22, 2015.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through songs like “Blank Space” and “Wildest Dreams.” The album is also the sound of Swift discovering who her people are—in addition to Antonoff, Swift had been steadily gaining more famous friends including Selena Gomez, Gigi Hadid and Karlie Kloss, many of whom appeared in the video for “Bad Blood” and showed up onstage with her as members of her ever-expanding squad during the *1989* tour.

The album was exceptionally well-received, dominating charts and breaking sales records. At the Grammys in 2016, *1989* won the prize for Album of the Year, making Swift the first female solo artist to ever win that accolade twice. The record showed up in the upper echelons of several publications’ lists of the best albums of the decade. Swift was bigger than she’d ever been, and with that size came more scrutiny on her life, which she tried not to take personally. “I’m realistic about the fact that millions of people don’t have time in their day to maintain a complex profile of who I am,” she said. “They only have time to come up with about two or three adjectives to describe people in the public eye. And that’s okay. As long as those three adjectives aren’t ‘trainwreck,’ ‘mess,’ ‘terrible.’ I figure eventually, if you hang around long enough, people will see all sides of you.” The world was about to find out if Swift had any more interesting sides to reveal.

POSSE POSE
Swift onstage in New Jersey during the 1989 World Tour with friends (above, from left) Hailee Steinfeld, Gigi Hadid, Lily Aldridge and Lena Dunham on July 10, 2015.

LOOKING AHEAD
By the time the 1989 World Tour came to an end, Swift (right) was the biggest pop star on the planet—and as everyone was about to find out, she still had more to say.

CHAPTER 6

Reputation

2017

Taylor needed to vent—a lot

HEAVY HITTER
Selena Gomez and Swift perform onstage at the Rose Bowl on May 19, 2018 (left, top). Swift with her four 2018 American Music Awards (bottom).

SWING OF THINGS
On July 22, 2018, Swift (right) took the stage at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, during a stop on the Reputation Stadium Tour.

Since her 2006 debut, Taylor

Swift had dropped a new album every two years like clockwork. So it was mildly shocking that there was an extra year's gap between *1989* and her sixth full-length release. Still, she remained in the public eye during that time. Her personal life continued to make headlines, thanks largely to high-profile relationships with DJ Calvin Harris and actor Tom Hiddleston. She was also still making new music, contributing a collaboration with Zayn Malik to the soundtrack to *Fifty Shades Darker* and penning the Little Big Town hit "Better Man"—initially intended for *Red*, she later recorded it for *Red (Taylor's Version)*.

Swift also found herself embroiled in low-level celebrity conflicts with Kim Kardashian and Katy Perry, and challenging the giant streaming services Spotify and Apple Music over their underpayment of artists. On another front, Swift won a lawsuit against a former Denver radio host who'd groped her during an event.

It was a lot of ugly stuff—and exhausting. Swift found herself writing songs that dealt with the frustration surrounding the chaos of her public life and her struggle to maintain a private existence. She needed a sonic palette that reflected the tone of her abrasive compositions, so she jettisoned the warm synths of *1989* in favor of a harsher combination of icy

CLOAK AND SWAGGER
Sporting dark red lipstick, a hooded Swift (left) performs in Dublin, Ireland, during a stop on the European leg of the Reputation Stadium Tour on June 15, 2018.

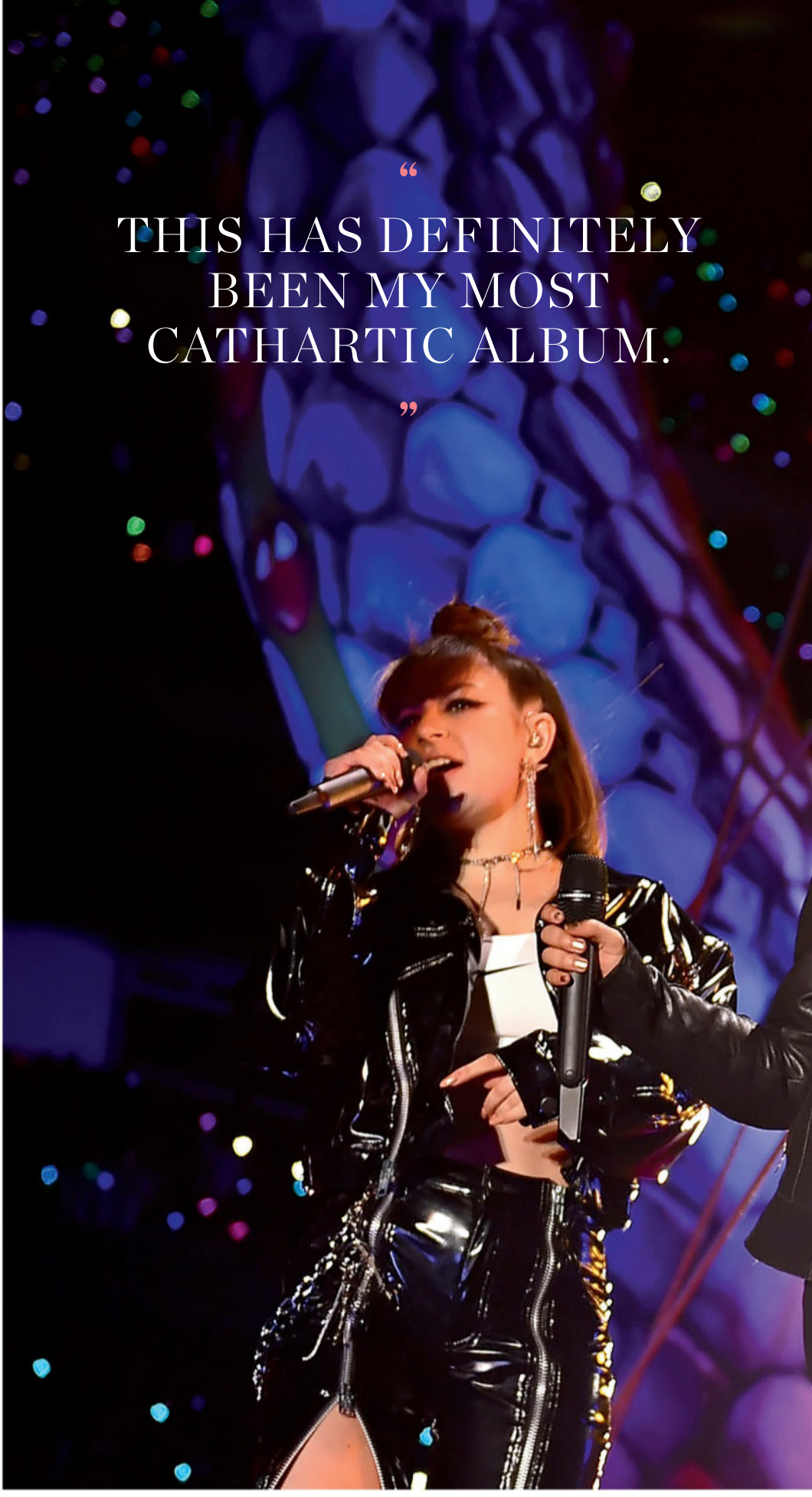
PIANO WOMAN
Swift smiles as she tickles the ivories during the Reputation Stadium Tour's stop at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, on Oct. 5, 2018 (below).

electropop and minimalist R&B. The resulting album, 2017's *Reputation*, may be the most polarizing work of Swift's discography, and a fulcrum point in her career.

To create *Reputation*'s unique sound, Swift recruited some reliable friends, including newly minted go-to Jack Antonoff, as well as Max Martin and Shellback. *Reputation* announces itself right away with "... Ready For It?" which traffics in distorted drums, gurgling bass and a bouncing sing-song cadence that wasn't that far away from the hip-hop hybrid style made popular by artists like Drake.

Swift has never been a stranger to telling honest truths, but she had rarely been this consistently confrontational. "If a man talks shit, then I owe him nothing/ I don't regret it one bit 'cause he had it coming," she sings on the warped electro-bounce "I Did Something Bad."

Not everything is as jagged: There's plenty of pleasantly hummable tunes like "Delicate" which recall the warmest moments of *1989*, and the stripped-down piano workout "New Year's Day" closes out the album. But "End Game," which features Ed Sheeran and hip-hop superstar Future, is straight-up trap music, a dalliance as far outside the box as Swift has ever wandered. It's the sound of Swift leaning into the persona the media had constructed for her, one



“THIS HAS DEFINITELY BEEN MY MOST CATHARTIC ALBUM.”

POWER TRIO
Swift performs alongside Charli XCX (left) and Camila Cabello (center), during the Reputation Stadium Tour at Soldier Field in Chicago on June 1, 2018.

BACK IN BLACK
Swift (below)—in a sparkly black bodysuit—belts out a song during a show at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, on July 20, 2018.

HISS SINGLE
Swift performs "Look What You Made Me Do" next to a giant, inflatable snake at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, on May 11, 2018 (right).

that was petty and shallow and gleefully vindictive. She's leaving behind her old identity as "The Poet Laureate of Puberty" in favor of something slightly more evolved and adult. Or, as she puts it during the breakdown on *Reputation*'s lead single, "Look What You Made Me Do": "The old Taylor can't come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, 'cause she's dead!"

The lead-up to the release of *Reputation* was a brilliant piece of modern promotion. Swift, a universal Instagram presence, cleared the decks on her social media accounts so she could go quiet before announcing the new release and debuting a stark black-and-white motif that informed the album cover and the promotional materials. She eschewed doing any press, instead relying on a series of fan-oriented listening events and her own momentum to build buzz.

Reputation sold over a million copies in its first week of release, reigned over the album chart for the three-week walk-up to Christmas, became the best-selling album of 2017 and led directly into a wildly successful stadium tour that played to nearly 3 million people. For some fans and critics, *Reputation* felt like a jarring swerve, but for Swift, it was part of a much-needed process. "This has definitely been my most cathartic album," she said. "After I finished it, it was like, 'Now I can write regular songs again.'"

CHAPTER 7

Lover

2019

With the air (mostly) cleared, hope returned

TROPHY FACE
In March 2019, Swift won two iHeartRadio awards (left, bottom). That November, Carole King (top) presented her with the Artist of the Decade award at the AMAs.

GARDEN PARTY
Panic! at the Disco's Brendon Urie (near right) performs "Me!" with Swift during the Billboard Music Awards at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas on May 1, 2019.

The Reputation tour was artistically

satisfying and incredibly lucrative for Taylor Swift. It also proved emotionally beneficial. After making a caustic album that dealt with her reactions to the outside world—and inhabiting alternate versions of herself as characters in the songs—Swift felt cleansed by the process of performing and buoyed by the love she'd received from her adoring audience.

A sense of freedom spread through her entire life. Not only had she been reinvigorated by the Reputation tour, but she also freed herself from her old label, Big Machine, after a business dispute with founder Scott Borchetta. Perhaps most important, she found her love life settled for the first time (at least for a while)—Swift's relationship with British actor Joe Alwyn had been a bedrock for her.

As a result, she found herself in a completely different artistic space when she sat down to craft her seventh album, *Lover*. "*Reputation* was so far from what I usually do," she said. "And *Lover* feels like a return to the fundamental songwriting pillars that I usually build my house on. It's really honest; it's not me playing a character. It's really just how I feel, undistilled."

ON BENDED KNEES
Swift gets low while performing at Dignity Health Sports Park in Carson, California, for iHeartRadio's Wango Tango summer festival on June 1, 2019.

> “SWIFT CONTINUED TO STAND UP FOR HERSELF.”

Swift also referred to her new album as “a love letter to love,” which put her squarely back in her comfort zone, writing songs about infatuation and romance. “This time around I feel more comfortable being brave enough to be vulnerable, because my fans are brave enough to be vulnerable with me,” she said.

She once again worked with Jack Antonoff, whose simple arrangements and warm synths created a dreamy resting place for her positive outlook. *Lover* is subtly one of Swift’s most sonically diverse albums. While it’s built on the electronic buzz she had been cultivating over her past few records, there are also dalliances into sparse dream pop (“Lover”), gorgeous stripped-down country folk (“Soon You’ll Get Better”—featuring buttery harmonies care of the Chicks)—genuinely haunting psychedelia (“It’s Nice to Have a Friend”), and something along the lines of acoustic punk (“Paper Rings”). The centerpiece is the story song “Miss Americana & The Heartbreak Prince,” a song co-written and produced by regular Lorde collaborator Joel Little that somehow bridges the gap between Swift’s high school drama past and her newfound political awakening. (Swift had somewhat notoriously not endorsed a candidate during the 2016 presidential election, though she later became a sharp critic of Donald Trump). “American stories burning before me/I’m feeling helpless, the damsels are depressed/Boys will be boys then, where are the wise men?” she sings.

In addition to addressing real-world social issues in her music, Swift continued to stand up for herself in her professional life. She had been in conversation with her old label, Big Machine, over the

POPS OF PASTEL Colorful suits were the costumes of choice for Swift’s backup dancers for the 2019 Billboard Music Awards at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas.

GILDED BABY GRAND
On Nov. 24, 2019, Swift performed "Lover" at a piano bearing the names of her albums and songs during the American Music Awards in Los Angeles (below).

WRITING ON THE WALL
Swift, wearing a polka dot romper, poses in front of a mural promoting her seventh studio album, *Lover*, in Brooklyn, New York, on Aug. 23, 2019 (right).

purchase of the master recordings of the six albums she had released through the company when it was bought by music manager and entrepreneur Scooter Braun, whose client roster included Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande. Swift said the negotiations with the new boss, who now owned the rights to her recordings, were done in bad faith, and she declared Braun "a manipulative bully." In response, she began a long and still-ongoing process of rerecording her first six full-length albums in order to fully own the tracks. She got to work recreating her old stuff with producer Christopher Rowe and dipped into her era-appropriate songwriting vault to put together some bonus tracks that were produced by Antonoff and Aaron Dessner, a member of the Brooklyn indie rock act The National. The first of these rereleases, *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* arrived in 2021, with *Red (Taylor's Version)* following later the same year.

Meanwhile, *Lover* was another triumph, debuting at No. 1 and becoming the best-selling album of the year (the fourth time Swift held that title). She dropped the Netflix documentary *Miss Americana* to critical acclaim in early 2020 and was all set to go on another massive world tour (which she was calling Lover Fest) before fate intervened.

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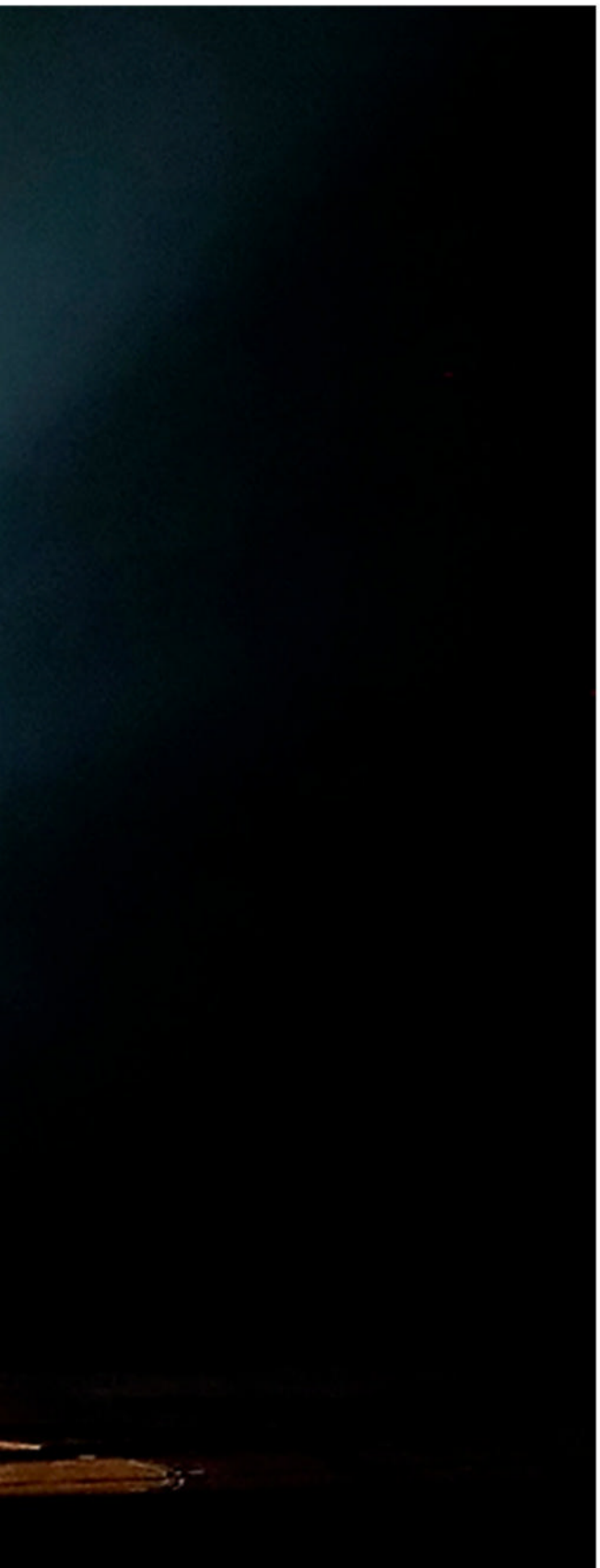
CHAPTER 8

Folklore/ Evermore 2020

During the pandemic, fiction became reality for an inspired Swift

LONE STAR
Swift, with her acoustic guitar, performed "Betty" off her album *Folklore* at the 55th Academy of Country Music Awards in Nashville on Sept. 16, 2020.



Just after *Lover* launched, in the late

summer of 2019, Taylor Swift announced the early details of her Lover Fest tour, which would find her headlining several standing festivals around the world as well as hosting her own massive stadium shows in North America. But as 2020 unfolded, the COVID-19 pandemic paused life for everyone in the U.S., including the biggest touring draw in the country. Swift initially postponed the Lover Fest dates to 2021, but a few months later—as the future of the live music industry remained uncertain—she outright canceled everything. "This is an unprecedented pandemic that has changed everyone's plans and no one knows what the touring landscape is going to look like in the near future," she wrote on Twitter. "I miss you terribly and can't wait til we can all safely be at shows together again."

Suddenly, with a massive amount of free time on her hands, Swift found herself returning to the thing that has always driven her: writing songs. During her time in quarantine, she did what a lot of other people did—she ensconced herself in film and got caught up on her reading. She found her new commitment to fictional tales bleeding into her songwriting, and she crafted a series of story songs largely built around fictional characters and scenarios rather than autobiographical details. Each song began with a particular image—a cardigan, a disco ball, a battleship—and grew out from there. "Pretty soon these images in my head grew faces or names and became characters," she wrote. "I found myself not only writing my own stories, but also writing about or from the

MOONLIGHT SERENADE
Swift sang from atop a cabin roof at the 2021 Grammys (left, top) before joining *Folklore* collaborators Jack Antonoff and Aaron Dessner (bottom, from left) inside.

FLOWER POWER
At the 63rd Annual Grammy Awards at Staples Center in Los Angeles on March 14, 2021, Swift won the trophy for Album of the Year for *Folklore* (right).

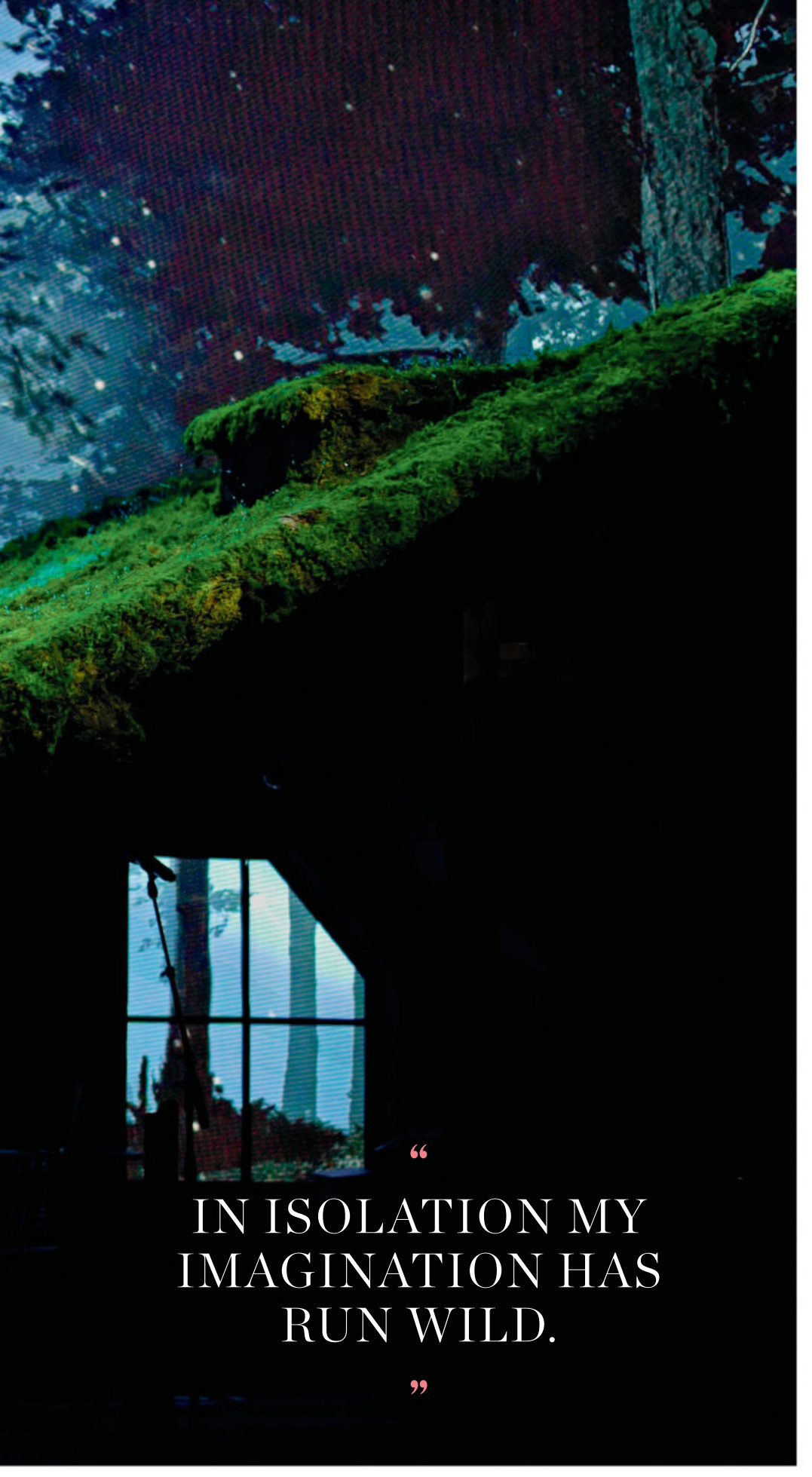
> "*FOLKLORE* WAS ANOTHER HIT FOR SWIFT."

perspective of people I've never met, people I've known, or those I wish I hadn't."

In order to realize these new ideas, she once again brought in Jack Antonoff, with whom she worked remotely. She also reached out to the sonic architect of one of her favorite bands. Swift had been a longtime fan of The National, a Brooklyn-based indie outfit whose dynamic quiet-storm approach had made them critical darlings. She had never met Aaron Dessner, the band's primary songwriter and producer, but she wanted to tap into his ability to wring cinematic drama out of musical simplicity. "I've always been so curious about people with synesthesia, who see colors or shapes when they hear music," she said. "The closest thing I've ever experienced is seeing an entire story or scene play out in my head when I hear Aaron Dessner's instrumental tracks."

Dessner and Antonoff both worked remotely, building and trading tracks and ideas digitally. Swift expected the project to be ready some time in early 2021, but the whole thing wrapped so quickly she decided to fast-track the release with no fanfare or promotion.

So, in the midst of the global pandemic, she announced she had a new album. Sixteen hours later, she dropped *Folklore*, a sprawling yet intimate series



“IN ISOLATION MY IMAGINATION HAS RUN WILD.”

ENCHANTED SLOPE
Swift sings songs from *Folklore* from the mossy roof of a cabin in a woodland setting at the 63rd Annual Grammy Awards on March 14, 2021.

STAGE PRESENCE
On Oct. 30, 2021, Swift (below) peformed onstage during the 36th Annual Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony in Cleveland.

COMFORTS OF HOME
Swift performs (right) from inside a cabin during the 63rd Annual Grammy Awards at Staples Center in Los Angeles on March 14, 2021.

of neo-folk tunes that represent some of Swift's most mature songwriting. "In isolation my imagination has run wild and this album is the result, a collection of songs and stories that flowed like a stream of consciousness," she said. "Picking up a pen was my way of escaping into fantasy, history and memory. I've told these stories to the best of my ability with all the love, wonder and whimsy they deserve. Now it's up to you to pass them down."

Folklore was another hit for Swift. It ruled the album chart long enought that Swift surpassed Whitney Houston as the woman with the most cumulative weeks at No. 1. The record also scored the most overwhelmingly positive reviews of Swift's career, and *Folklore* landed in the top spot of several publications' year-end best-of lists. Clearly, Swift was particularly enamored of her work with Dessner, because only five months later she released (without warning) *Evermore*, another set of stripped-down cinematic story songs she'd almost entirely co-written and produced with Dessner. It was a tough year for most Americans, but a great one for Swift, who released two well-received records, collected a third Album of the Year Grammy (for *Folklore*) and once again reinvented herself—this time as a deft storyteller in the folk tradition, suddenly mentioned in the same breath as icons Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell.

CHAPTER 9

Midnights 2022

Taylor Swift continues to grow, taking her fans and admirers along for the journey

CHAPTER 9

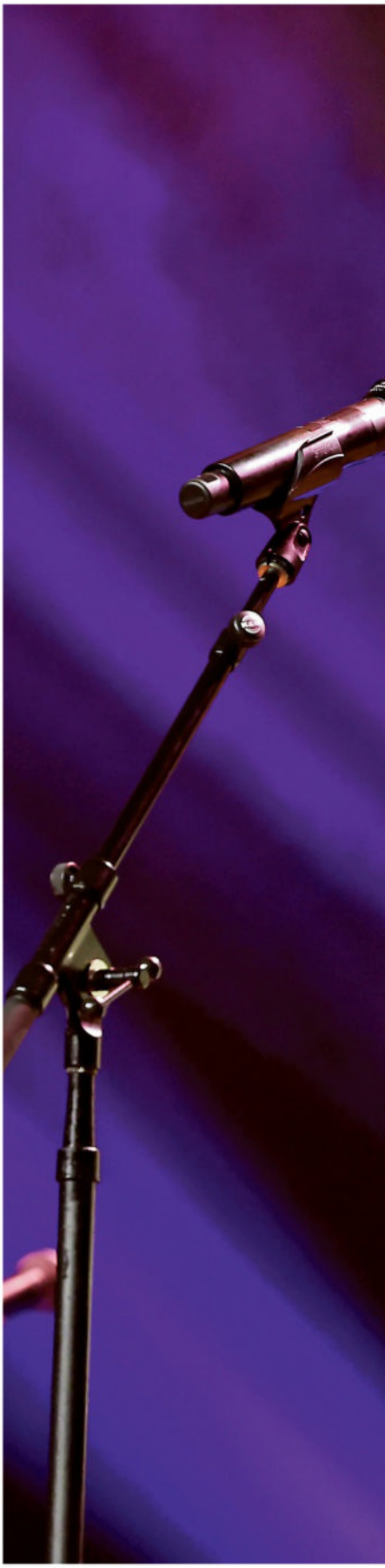
The one-two punch of *Folklore*

and *Evermore* kept Taylor Swift at the forefront of the pop culture conversation. And as the pandemic dragged on, she continued to evolve.

A major priority was her rerecording project, which would allow her to own the master recordings of her first six albums (still owned by her old label, Big Machine, with which she'd had a falling out). Two of those reinventions, *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* and *Red (Taylor's Version)* were released in 2021 and found Swift not only recreating all of her earliest hits (allowing superfans to spot subtle differences in inflection and interpretation between the old recordings and the new) but also digging deep into her treasure trove of previously unreleased or unrecorded songs.

The big prize of that collection was "All Too Well (10 Minute Version)," a song originally co-written with longtime collaborator Liz Rose and released in its shortened form for the first recording of *Red*. Swift had initially conceived the churning power ballad in its epic form but trimmed it back for commercial consideration. She brought up the longer version of the tune in various interviews over the years, and it attained a mythical status among her followers. When it was finally released, it was greeted with remarkable fanfare: Swift wrote and directed an accompanying short film starring *Teen Wolf* heartthrob Dylan O'Brien and *Stranger Things* star Sadie Sink, and the track was streamed so much that it shot to the top of the Billboard Hot 100, giving Swift her eighth No. 1 single and cementing the track as the longest to ever hold the top of the pops in America.

In addition to reclaiming her catalog, Swift also had time to work on new music. *Midnights*, her 10th album,



ALL SMILES
Swift—the Nashville Songwriter Awards Artist of the Decade honoree—performs at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville on Sept. 20, 2022.

AMERICAN MUSIC AWARDS

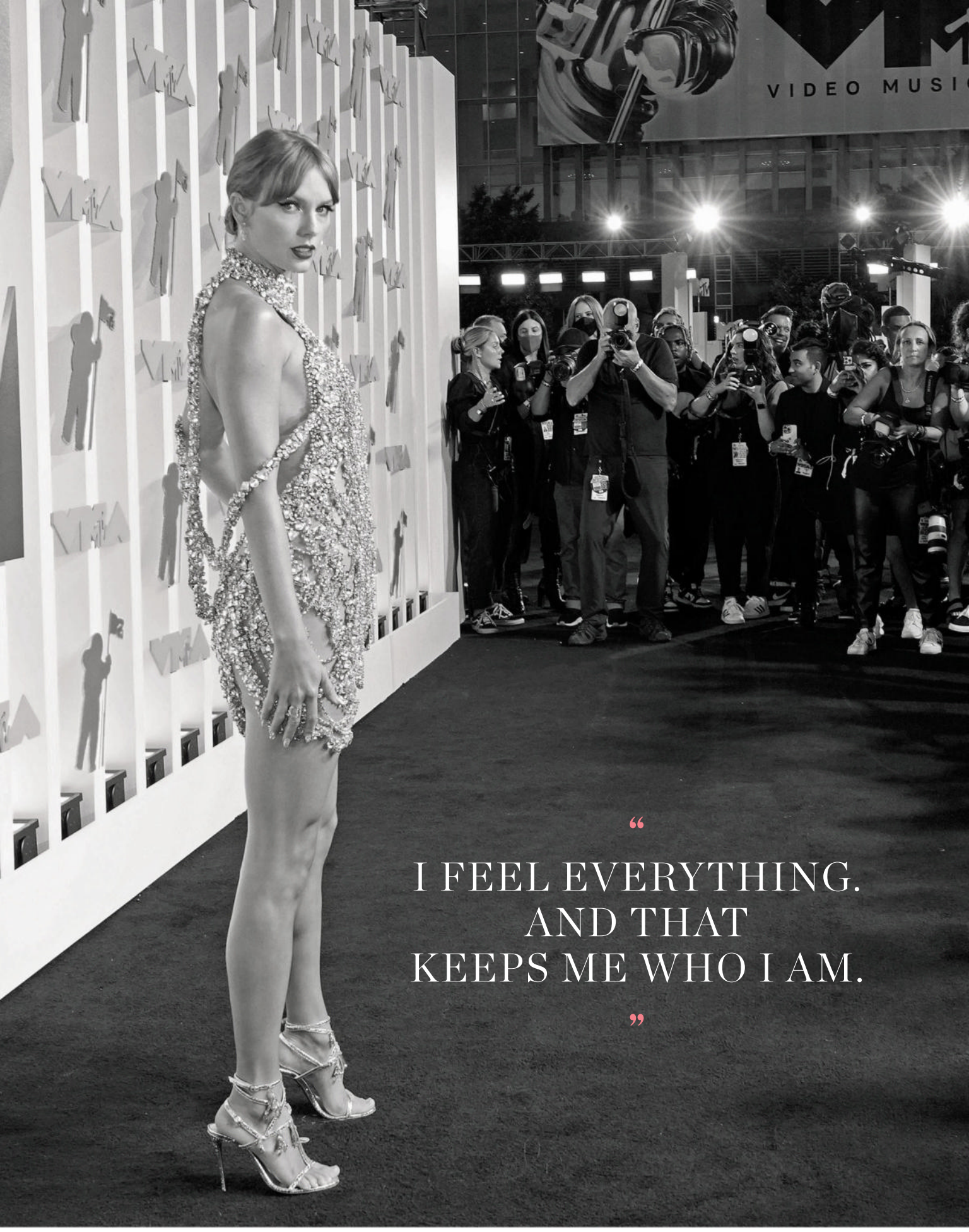
TROPHY TROVE
Swift poses with her six American Music Awards—including Artist of the Year—in the press room of L.A.'s Microsoft Theater on Nov. 20, 2022 (left).

RED LETTER DAY
One of Swift's six wins at the 2022 American Music Awards (below), was for Favorite Pop Album, which she earned for *Red (Taylor's Version)*.

arrived in the fall of 2022. It split the difference between her past songwriting approaches, combining the autobiographical interiors of *Lover* with the storytelling of *Folklore* and *Evermore*. Swift announced the album at the 2022 MTV Video Music Awards and later explained that *Midnights* was a concept album of sorts, with each track built around bouts of insomnia Swift had experienced over the course of her life.

Alongside producer and co-writer Jack Antonoff, *Midnights* is one of Swift's most sonically cohesive releases, reveling in the warm throb of the kind of bedroom pop and low-fi electronica practiced by alt-pop mavens Lorde and Billie Eilish. Swift clearly took away all the right lessons from her past work: The gutsy single "Anti-Hero" shimmers on top but contains a nice vein of darkness lurking underneath, while "You're On Your Own, Kid" masters the melancholy of the *Folklore*/*Evermore* narratives and "Vigilante Shit" toys with the tough minimalism of her *Reputation* era.

The fervor surrounding the release of *Midnights* was intense. Though she did a series of TikTok videos previewing the release, she did not drop a single before *Midnights* was finally released on Oct. 21, 2022. Fans and critics obsessed over its details, and *Midnights* discourse dominated social media. The intensity of that devotion was born out in the album's sales: Not only did it debut at No. 1, it also was streamed more in a single day than any other record in history. When the Billboard Hot 100 was published the following week, not only did "Anti-Hero" become Swift's ninth chart-topper, but songs from *Midnights* took up every slot in the top 10, making her the first artist to



“I FEEL EVERYTHING. AND THAT KEEPS ME WHO I AM.”

READY FOR IT
Swift poses while walking the red carpet before the MTV Video Musc Awards at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey, on Aug. 28, 2022.

ever pull that off and pushing her past Madonna as the woman with the most top 10 singles in history.

Perhaps the most anticipated aspect of *Midnights* was the announcement of the Eras tour, which will keep Swift on the road in stadiums for half of 2023. Demand for tickets was so high that Ticketmaster's system repeatedly crashed during the presale, forcing the cancellation of the public on-sale and inspiring several state attorneys general and the U.S. Congress to look into the ticketing giant's monopoly. On behalf of her fans, Swift was deeply unhappy. "I'm not going to make excuses for anyone because we asked them, multiple times, if they could handle this kind of demand and we were assured they could," she said.

Swift will undoubtedly continue to be an agent for change. But her work will always come back to the songwriting, the thing that has always been there for her and which connects her to her fans and her own humanity. "There is a tendency to want to get thick-skinned," Swift once said. "There is a tendency to block out negative things, because they really hurt. But if I stop feeling pain, then I'm afraid I'll stop feeling immense excitement and epic celebration and happiness. I can't stop feeling those things, so I feel everything. And that keeps me who I am."

SILVER GLOBES
Cradling her four MTV Europe Video Music Awards, Swift (above) poses for photos at PSD Bank Dome in Dusseldorf, Germany, on Nov. 13, 2022.

HAPPY GLOW
Swift beams during her acceptance speech for Video of the Year during the MTV Video Music Awards at the Prudential Center in Newark, New Jersey (right).

TAYLOR SWIFT

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TAYLOR SWIFT IS A MEGASTAR, yet she remains a mystery. The best way to know her is through her music. These are her songs. These are her stories. These are her eras.